Pathways to Trust: A Grounded Theory of Inter-Ethnic Social Capital Formation in a Disadvantaged Neighborhood

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Research Problem

Ethnic conflict in disadvantaged neighborhoods contributes to white flight and inhibits neighborhood revitalization. Racial tension is one reason whites continue to flee central cities, where ethnic populations are the greatest, as many whites move to predominantly white suburban areas. Of the 100 largest US cities in 1990, 71 had lost anywhere from two to over 50 percent of their white population by 2000 (Brookings Institution, 2001).

Past research typically used a deficit-based approach and focused on the dynamics and impact of ethnic conflict, prejudice, and racism, not on how social capital—the networks of trust and cooperation (Putnam, 2000)—form across ethnic groups. Social capital is typically conceived of as bonding capital (tight bonds of close relationships) and bridging capital (loose ties or affiliations) (Granovetter, 1974; Briggs, 1997). In situations of conflict between ethnic groups, where each group seeks to create its own community identity in the same space, two distinct social capital networks might compete with and undermine each other.

Research points toward a reduction of social capital across ethnic groups and, therefore, a decrease in the neighborhood capacity to come together to solve problems held in common. Collier (1998) found that when social capital was high among existing residents it could result in the exclusion of new entrants into the community. Varshney (2001) concluded that what matters is not whether social capital exists but whether it cuts across ethnic groups. When inter-ethnic networks were stronger, conflict was more likely to be expressed peacefully. In communities where intra-ethnic networks were strong but inter-ethnic networks were weak, ethnic violence was more likely to occur.

Ethnic neighborhood conflict is defined as the culturally laden tensions between two or more groups defined by race, language, religion, or tribe who share the same or adjoining geographic space (Horowitz, 1985). Schirch (2002) found that when individuals perceive that they are in conflict, they tend to see their own identity and that of the other group in the conflict according to one social category, such as race, which is

a dehumanizing process that strips individuals of other sources of their humanity. In examining ethnic conflict at the neighborhood level, an additional dynamic can be present that exacerbates the problem. Merry (1981) found that some ethnic groups are encapsulated in their own networks at the exclusion of others.

The urban problems associated with the lack of social capital across ethnic groups are well-documented. There is a gap in the literature, however, on how social capital forms across ethnic groups from the same neighborhood.

Research Background and Questions

This study explored the process by which inter-ethnic social capital is formed in one of the most segregated cities in the United States in a neighborhood known for racial tensions between long-term Polish-Slavic residents and newly arriving African American residents. In 1990, whites made up 95 percent of the entire neighborhood but by 2000, only 71 percent. The single greatest gain in ethnic population increase was from African Americans, who numbered three percent in 1990 and 26 percent in 2000.

Intensive fieldwork during an appreciative inquiry process in the neighborhood formed the basis for the development of a grounded theory on social capital formation across ethnic lines. Consistent with the grounded theory approach, a series of questions guided the research rather than preconceived hypotheses (Strauss and Corbin, 1990):

- What are the conditions and ways in which residents overcome the emotional hot spots, the places where tensions are high between ethnic groups?
- What affect does high intra-ethnic social capital have, if any, on inter-ethnic social capital between ethnic groups of the same neighborhood?
- What are ways in which diverse people connect with one another, share common goals, and work together for positive change?
- What are the processes and conditions by which trust and cooperation form across ethnic groups of the same neighborhood?
- What roles do associations and organizations play in the development of trust and cooperation in expanded or new inter-ethnic networks?
- What is the best way to characterize the networks that exist in the relationships between ethnic groups of the same neighborhood—is it primarily bonding or bridging social capital?

Research Methodology

The research took place simultaneously during an appreciative inquiry in the neighborhood, an action research method that involves a holistic form of self-inquiry combining a search for knowledge and a theory of intentional collective action (Cooperrider and Sirvastva, 1987). The dissertation study involved grounded theory research, a systematic set of procedures to develop an inductively derived theoretical

formulation of the reality under investigation (Strauss and Corbin, 1990). The study used the constant comparative method to arrive at a grounded theory of inter-ethnic social capital formation. The field research took place over 15 months.

Data included open-ended audio-taped interviews, focus groups, observation, and administrative data from local community organizers. The researcher began by interviewing seven neighborhood leaders, three of whom were African American, and three white residents who expressed concerns about race relations.

Seven focus groups were held during the study period. Participants were recruited through multiple neighborhood outreach efforts. Snowball sampling added additional participants as those already in the study offered names of other residents who had significant experience in relating to those in the neighborhood of a different ethnicity than their own. Four homogenous focus groups provided safe environments for residents to talk candidly about race and ethnic relations in the neighborhood. Two of these groups were all African American groups, facilitated by an African American doctoral student. The researcher (white) facilitated a white focus group in an area where the increase in black residents had been most dramatic. Another all white focus group was with the community organizers. The remaining three focus groups were typical case groups involving mixed ethnic groups who reported a high level of trust among themselves. A total of 43 residents participated in the focus groups, approximately one half white and the other half African American residents. The majority of white participants were of Eastern European background. Each group was audio-taped and lasted 45 to 90 minutes in length.

Summaries of 50 additional interviews conducted by residents involved in the appreciative inquiry process also served as a key source of data. Observation and meeting notes from the appreciative inquiry meetings provided residents' own analysis of what contributed to comfortable diverse relations in the neighborhood. Finally, eight post-focus group interviews provided confirming and disconfirming cases. Data analysis continued until existing cases provided sufficient information to be credible in the creation of categories and themes. The researcher concluded that saturation was reached when no new significant information could be added through new cases.

The first step in developing the grounded theory was open coding, the "process of breaking down, examining, comparing, conceptualizing, and categorizing data" (Strauss and Corbin, 1990). This involved repeatedly reading over transcripts and field notes, feeling the energy of various moments in the interviews or focus groups and examining the researcher's own reactions to the data. Axial coding was the next step, a set of procedures whereby coded data were put back together in new ways by making connections between categories. Integration of concepts, known as selective coding, was the final phase, which was a process of selecting the core category, systematically relating it to other categories, validating those relationships, and filling categories that need further refinement and development. More than one core category emerged, which led to the development of a theory that included perceptions of race relations in the neighborhood and pathways to inter-ethnic trust.

Results

The grounded theory includes five sections. The first section portrays a typology of how African American and Polish-Slavic residents perceive race relations in the neighborhood. The second section and central finding consists of seven pathways to trust: four group-level pathways and three individual-level or interpersonal pathways. The third section describes six obstacles to building inter-ethnic trust in the neighborhood. The fourth section of the grounded theory identifies five essential building blocks common to all trust-building paths in the neighborhood. The building blocks include creating a safe space, being positive or working on a common goal, talking one-on-one to create relationships and meaning, the inner shift that takes place in relationships, and formal or informal leaders who invite people into the trust-building paths. An inner shift or transformation is essential and typically parallels external behavior changes.

Finally, the fifth section provides a theory about what trust looks like, based on how residents described the networks and connections they had formed with people of another ethnic group. Trust was seen as mutual commitment and connectedness, as people realized they are the same or want the same things: a new sense of belonging, to become comfortable, to watch out for one another, and friendship.

The grounded theory that emerged from residents' experiences demonstrates that bonding social capital does form across ethnic groups. This is contrary to the literature that limits inter-ethnic relations to the looser bridging capital (Putnam, 2000). The networks and pathways of trust detailed through residents' stories functions as social support, a shared sense of community, and community problem-solving. In the trust-forming process, inter-ethnic conflict is transformed as residents "re-humanize" individuals of the other race, seeing them as a composite of multiple attributes—not just race or ethnicity.

Social capital is a necessary building block in the revitalization of disadvantaged neighborhoods. Increasing the trust and cooperation of diverse residents in a neighborhood is essential for attracting resources, changing the neighborhood identity, and improving the quality of life in a disadvantaged neighborhood.

Implications for Social Work Practice

Through understanding the process in which trust forms across ethnic lines in one neighborhood, lessons become evident for other communities. The grounded theory on social capital, while not generalizeable, provides a useful framework for other diverse communities desiring to overcome ethnic conflict and access the resources embedded in relationships. This study provides insights into investment strategies that might result in increased social capital for other disadvantaged neighborhoods. The results can be used in guiding social work practitioners, public policy advocates, funders, and educators.

Finally, this grounded theory provides new conceptual and theoretical frameworks that can be tested through future research. The results of the study might lead to new quantitative research to measure the effects of these new concepts and theories of social capital formation across diverse ethnic groups, whether at the neighborhood level or

some other unit of analysis. Research increasingly indicates the significance of social capital—both bonding and bridging capital—as essential to the revitalization of urban neighborhoods where networks and access to resources are more geographically centered than for other communities.

The more people connect with each other, either by bonding or bridging, the more they will trust each other and the better off they will be individually and collectively (Gittell & Vidal, 1998). This research, by deliberately focusing on occasions when networks of trust and cooperation have existed across ethnic lines, contributes to the development of new cognitive maps and narratives that build social capital and community in ethnically diverse neighborhoods. The formation of inter-ethnic bonding and cultural capital then removes existing barriers to bridging capital. As a result of this process, diverse residents overcome prejudice, isolation, and lack of unity to attract outside resources for neighborhood revitalization.

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Table 1: Typology of Neighborhood Views and Perspectives of Race Relations

Trust Level	Commun-ication	Emotional State	View of Neighborhood	Spectrum of Black Perspectives	Spectrum of White Perspectives
Low ↕ High	Minimal Guarded Unclear ↕ Open Clear Regular	Angry Afraid Threatened Suspicious Frustrated Anxious Perplexed Cautious Reserved Curious Hopeful Giving Excited Relaxed Proud Loved/ Loving	1. There goes the neighborhood, racial tensions can boil over	**You want trouble, I'll give you trouble** • React, confront, fight • Use whatever it takes • You can't intimidate me • Persistent survivors	**Keep the lazy blacks out** • They are all Section 8 and lazy • We'll fight you and make it hard for you stay, and/or • We're moving out, we've had it
			4. There's trouble on the street	**You pick on us because we are black** • Confront occasionally • Some stay involved, others withdraw • Threaten to move out	**We all pretend** • Against blacks in private • Mostly ignore problems • Get frustrated, confront, then back off
				Don't get involved—too many problems • primarily not seen as racial problem • share frustrations about black youth on streets • Withdrawal, put energy elsewhere	**You have to be careful** • Keep to yourself, even at meetings • It's not race, but a class issue • Who can do something about rude kids and their ignorant parents?
			4. A quiet calm street	**Stay to yourself and you will keep the peace** • Cordial, polite • Not seen as racial problem • Respectful but distant • Lend a hand if really needed	**I'm not prejudiced, but** • If you're out of line I'll tell you • I try to teach them some things • When offended by blacks at meetings, withdraw, don't say why
			4. 4. Everything you need in the best neighborhood	**If you treat people nice, they will treat you nice** • Be responsible, a good neighbor • Help each other, it's the right thing to do • Engage, talk, be friendly	**If we could all be colorblind** • Engage self and others • It's the right thing to do • Question self and others • Overlook or resolve
				Accept others, don't try to change them • Work together • Build relationships, share informally • Disagree as friends • Fulfilled in relationships	**We all can learn and grow in community** • Reach out and stretch yourself • Admit prejudice and work at it • Engage in changing community • Fulfilled in relationships

Table 2: Four Paths that Build Inter-ethnic Trust and Cooperation among Groups

Group Level of Involvement					
Path	**Agents**	**Agent's Perspective**	**Prior Relationship**	**Key Elements of Path**	**Reported Outcomes**
Crisis	Residents with organizers	Variety	Some known, some unknown	Neighborhood-wide gatherings, committee emerged to develop strategy, daily marches, many public strategy sessions, attend court, celebrate victory	Care for one another Watch out for each other We know each other Committed to work together Vulnerability New view of neighborhood Sense of community Communicate regularly Trust each other Accept each other Friendship Sense of belonging Connectedness
	Black female resident	Treat people nice	Knows neighbors somewhat	Get angry, call neighbors together, form block club, work with authorities, celebrate victory, continue to meet	
	Black female resident	Stay to yourself	Does not know neighbors	Identify common goal, come together, form block club, develop strategy, work/talk together, celebrate victory, take advantage of informal opportunities	
Proactive Catalyst	Black female resident	Treat people nice	New to neighborhood	Reach out before patterns set in, look for good in other, provide services to others, receive help, organize block club, have fun	
	White female resident	Treat people nice	Knows neighbors well	Hanging out, offers kids help, engages parents, set norms, kids help each other, father and others reach out, act like family to each other	
Convened Group	Organizers with residents	Variety of high trust perspectives	Working relationships, some unknown	Bring diverse group together, share meal together, invite people to share one-on-one, find common ground, work on common goal, repeat experience	
Natural	Children and youth	Not defined	Known and unknown	Uninhibited children play together, oblivious to differences, spontaneous and free, conflicts quickly forgotten	

Table 3: Three Paths that Build Inter-ethnic Trust and Cooperation among Individuals

Individual Level of Involvement					
Path	**Agent and Receiver**	**Agent's Perspective**	**Prior Relationship**	**Key Elements of Path**	**Reported Outcomes**
Helping/ Receiving	Young black male resident/senior Polish woman	Treat people nice/ Be careful	Unknown next door neighbors	Be neighborly, offer unsolicited help, small talk, repeat doing favors, discover other's interests, give meaningful gifts	Friendship Mutuality
Teaching/ Learning	Polish center director/black male teen	Colorblind/Stay to yourself	Known but distant	Persistently make yourself available, be consistent with who you are, offer skill/knowledge the other needs/wants, interact informally, see the best in learner	We care for each other New Relationship
Share Pain/ Support	White female teen/ Appalachian retired white male	Colorblind/ I'm not prejudiced	Acquaintances	Talk, become vulnerable, share painful situation, dialogue about both sides of situation, accept support and empathy, receive recognition.	Connectedness Accept each other